SPORT

Vingegaard eyes Giro d'Italia, Tour de France double

LA NUCIA: Danish cycling great Jonas Vingegaard will race the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia this year as he bids to become the eighth rider to win the three Grand Tours.

The Visma-Lease a Bike rider unveiled his schedule on Tuesday at his team's media day in Nucia, on Spain's Costa Blanca.

The two-time Tour de France champion added the Vuelta a Espana trophy to his collection of titles last year.

He will compete for the first time in the Giro from May 8-31, where he will be the overwhelming favourite in the absence of Slovenian Tadej Pogacar.

Vingegaard will then race the Tour de France from July 4-26. He won the Tour in 2022 and 2023 but will start this time as an outsider against two-time defending champion Pogacar.

"I have been thinking about riding the Giro for a while now," said the 29-year-old. "It's one of the biggest races on the calendar and it's also one I have never done before. I really want to experience it, and now feels like the perfect moment.

"Winning the Vuelta last fall only gives me more motivation to go all-in for victory in Italy as well. I would love to add the pink jersey to my collection."

The Dane will begin his season on Feb 16 at the UAE Tour before also racing the Tour of Catalonia from March 23-29.

"Over the past five years, my build-up to the Tour has been largely the same. This time we have chosen something new," he said.

"The organisation has designed a great course for the Giro. Perhaps not as demanding as in recent years, which makes combining the Giro and the Tour a favourable option for us."

Vingegaard will attempt to repeat Pogacar's feat of 2024, when the Slovenian won both the Giro d'Italia and the Tour de France.

At the Giro, won in 2025 by his former teammate Simon Yates, who announced his retirement last week, Vingegaard will have another objective: to become just the eighth rider to have won all three Grand Tours in his career.

Great rival Pogacar has won the Tour de France four times and the Giro once, but finished third during his only participation in Spain in 2019.

Bernard Hinault, Eddy Merckx, Jacques Anquetil, Felice Gimondi, Alberto Contador, Vincenzo Nibali and Chris Froome are the seven riders to have won all three Grand Tours.—AFP

LIVERPOOL: Florian Wirtz (second R) of Liverpool scores against Barnsley during their FA Cup third-round match at Anfield.—Reuters

Slot angered by 'weird' Szoboszlai error in Liverpool's FA Cup win

LIVERPOOL: Dominik Szoboszlai scored a stunner and gave away a howler as Liverpool beat third-tier Barnsley 4-1 on Monday to set up a home FA Cup fourth round clash with Premier League rivals Brighton & Hove Albion.

The Hungarian international unleashed a rocket into the top corner from long range to open the scoring at Anfield on Monday before Jeremie Frimpong doubled the home side's lead.

But Szoboszlai gifted the League One side a route back into the tie when he fluffed an attempted backheel inside his own box and Adam Phillips gratefully smashed home.

Barnsley boss Conor Hourihane claimed Szoboszlai's lax move was disrespectful and not one he would have tried in a Premier League game.

Arne Slot was also far from happy with his midfielder, who has been Liverpool's outstanding performer so far in a difficult season for the English champions.

"I don't think you should do that in a FA Cup game, or a League Cup game, or in a friendly game, or in a training session. It was a weird choice," said Slot. "I also have my opinion about it but I prefer to keep that to myself and speak about that with Dom."

Hourihane was furious his side were not awarded a penalty midway through the second half for a trip by Szoboszlai on Reyes Cleary.

Slot was forced to empty his bench of key players as Florian Wirtz, Hugo Ekitike, Ibrahima Konate and Ryan Gravenberch were introduced just after the hour mark.

Liverpool laboured going forward for most of the second period until their star duo of attacking substitutes clicked to clinch victory in the final six minutes plus added time.

Ekitike's deft flick found Wirtz, who curled into the top corner for his third goal in five games since breaking his duck in his 23rd appearance for the Reds.

The roles were reversed in stoppage time as Wirtz unselfishly crossed for Ekitike to tap in.

Liverpool's reward is a home tie against Manchester United's conquerors Brighton in round four.

MACCLESFIELD DRAW BRENTFORD

The fourth-round draw on Monday gave sixth-tier Macclesfield another chance to knock out Premier League opposition after being drawn at home to Brentford.

The National League North team produced one of the greatest upsets in the competition's history when they defeated holders Crystal Palace 2-1 at Moss Rose on Saturday.

The 117 places separating Premier League outfit Palace from Macclesfield is the most overcome by an underdog in FA Cup history.

Yet, they could break their own record next month should they get the better of Brentford, who sit fifth in the Premier League.

New Chelsea manager Liam Rosenior was handed a trip back to his old club Hull City.

Rosenior played in the FA Cup final for Hull City against winners Arsenal in 2014 and also managed the club from 2022 to 2024.

He kicked off his tenure as Chelsea boss last Saturday with a 5-1 FA Cup third round win at Championship (second tier) side Charlton Athletic.

Premier League leaders Arsenal, the record 14-times winners of the FA Cup, will host League One (third tier) Wigan Athletic who won in 2013.

Aston Villa, who beat Tottenham Hotspur in the third round, will be at home to Newcastle United in an all-Premier League clash.

Manchester City will have fourth-tier opponents in either Salford City, in what would be a mismatched local game, or Swindon Town.

The matches will be played around the weekend of February 14 and 15.—Agencies

Britain sets ambitious medal target for Milano-Cortina Games

LONDON: Britain will target between four to eight medals at the Milano-Cortina Olympics, with team chiefs quietly confident that they can beat the record of five achieved at Sochi and PyeongChang.

The team returned with only two medals four years ago in Beijing but, with 21 world championship medals across the various sports in the current Olympic cycle, optimism is running high.

UK Sport, who distributed 32.5 million pounds to the various winter sports' governing bodies in the current cycle, say they have set the target range, rather than a specific target, in collaboration with the governing bodies.

"We should absolutely feel confident, we have so many athletes who have achieved podium after podium, which is unprecedented," Kate Baker, Director of Performance and People at UK Sport, said on Tuesday.

"Our medal ranges reflect the fact that British athletes are arriving at the Games in hugely competitive form."

Britain's strongest medal prospects will be at the sliding and curling centre in Cortina. Those two sports have provided Britain with 12 Winter Olympics medals.

Success in snow sports has been elusive, though, with only three medals — Jenny Jones's bronze in snowboard slopestyle at the 2014 Sochi Games and Izzy Atkin and Billy Morgan taking bronzes in freestyle skiing and snowboarding in 2018 in PyeongChang.

Despite funding cuts, the current crop of snow sports athletes are genuine medal contenders.—Reuters

Juventus go fourth after thumping Cremonese

MILAN: Juventus kept hold of fourth spot in Serie A on Monday after cruising to a 5-0 win over Cremonese and continuing their revival under Luciano Spalletti.

Three ahead at half-time through Gleison Bremer, Jonathan David and Kenan Yildiz, a Filippo Terracciano own goal and strike from Weston McKennie made sure of a comprehensive fifth win in six league matches for Juve.

Juve are level on 39 points with champions Napoli and AS Roma, and just four behind league leaders Inter following a dominant display in Turin.

However Inter, Napoli and second-placed AC Milan all have a game in hand due their participation in the Italian Super Cup in Saudi Arabia, with those matches to be played on Wednesday and Thursday.

Promoted Cremonese already had a mountain to climb after just a quarter of an hour as Bremer fortuitously deflected Fabio Miretti's volley past Emil Audero. That was quickly followed up by a brilliant counter-attack finished off by Canada striker David.

And Davide Nicola's team's hopes were extinguished shortly after they had a penalty, for a Manuel Locatelli challenge on Dennis Johnsen, revoked following a VAR check midway through the first half.

That decision sparked a furious reaction from Nicola who was promptly sent off for dissent, and within minutes Federico Baschirotto conceded a penalty for handball, even though the ball was deflected onto his arm from his own foot.

Yildiz hit the post from the spot but lashed home from a fortunate rebound, and from that point on the result was never in doubt.

McKennie made sure of Juve's biggest margin of victory under Spalletti, who replaced Igor Tudor in late October, by forcing Terracciano's own goal shortly after half-time and then slotting home the fifth in the 64th minute.—AFP

Paris FC give neighbours PSG a 'slap in the face' in French Cup upset

PARIS: Paris St Germain midfielder Senny Mayulu said their shocking 1-0 defeat by Paris FC on Monday was a "slap in the face" after the defending French Cup champions were knocked out in the round of 32 by their capital rivals.

Four days after clinching their fourth consecutive French Super Cup, PSG were humbled at the Parc des Princes by Paris FC, who returned to the French top flight this season after a 46-year absence.

PSG lost their first home game in the competition since 2022 and suffered their first last-32 defeat since 2014.

Adding insult to injury, it was one of their former players who delivered the killer blow, Jonathan Ikone poking home the winner in the 74th minute after Paris FC broke on the counter.

"We dominated the game, but unfortunately we couldn't convert our chances," Mayulu told reporters. "We're taking a slap in the face, but we're going to bounce back. It's a defeat, but now we're moving on to something else. We want to regain first place in the [Ligue 1] championship.

"We're going to give it our all in training as we usually do and we're going to try, we're going to do everything we can to win all the remaining competitions."

Ikone, who came through PSG's youth system and made his senior debut with the club, joined Paris FC this season and the 27-year-old refrained from celebrating his goal against his former club.

"No, no celebration, I can't celebrate. They gave me everything. I'm super happy to score here, but I also respect the club that gave me everything," Ikone said. "We're really happy because we approached the match well, defended well and scored the goal we needed to win. Now we're looking ahead and I hope this will give us a boost for the championship too."

Before kick-off the hosts' former captain Mamadou Sakho, who began his career with the Paris FC academy before crossing town, announced his retirement on the pitch.

The sides met earlier this month in the first top-flight derby in the City of Light since 1990, as Desire Doue and Ousmane Dembele scored in a 2-1 win for the Champions League holders.

Since then, PSG lifted the French Super Cup edging rivals Olympique de Marseille on penalties in Kuwait last Thursday.

Paris FC are 15th in Ligue 1 and just four points above the relegation zone while PSG are second, a point behind surprise leaders Lens.

PSG manager Luis Enrique said the result was unfair after his side dominated the match. "It's a competition we love, we have to accept it and that's the way it is," he added. "If I have to lose matches, I'd like it to be this way."—Agencies

PARIS St-Germain's Goncalo Ramos (top) vies for the ball with Timothee Kolodziejczak of Paris FC during their French Cup round-of-32 match at the Parc des Princes Stadium.—AFP

Flying start for defending champion Shahid as national snooker commences

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: The NBP 50th National Snooker Championship flagged off on Tuesday here at the NBP Sports Complex with defending champion Shahid Aftab making a strong start while young prodigy Hasnain Akhtar delivered the day's major upset by toppling a top seed.

In a tournament featuring 48 players divided into 12 groups, the opening day of the round-robin stage set the tone for the competition where the top two from each group will advance.

The knockout rounds will see the top eight qualifiers progress directly to the pre-quarterfinals, with the remaining 16 contesting a last-24 round.

Defending champion Shahid of Punjab launched his title defence with a commanding 4-0 victory over Daniyal Shahzad of Islamabad.

Shahid controlled the match from the outset, sealing frames with breaks of 53 and 52 in a dominant display.

The day's most significant result, however, came from Sindh's Hasnain, the Asian Under-21 champion in 2024, who overcame fifth seed Mohammad Naseem Akhtar of Punjab 4-2.

After losing the first two frames, including a close 80-72 defeat in the second where he made a 62 break, Hasnain rallied brilliantly. He won four consecutive frames, notably crafting a break of 92 in the fourth, to secure a impressive victory.

Veteran cueist Mohammad Asif, the country's most successful player and a three-time IBSF world champion, sent a powerful message with a flawless 4-0 win over Barjeesh Khan.

Representing NBP, Asif was in sublime form, constructing two century breaks, both of 130 to down the recently crowned national U-21 champion Barjees.

He opened his match with a 130 clearance in the first frame and repeated the feat in the third, adding an 82 break in the second for a dominant performance.

In other matches featuring top contenders, Mohammad Sajjad (NBP), last year's championship runner-up, navigated a challenge from reigning U-17 champion Mohammad Farhan to win 4-2.

Meanwhile, 2024 national champion Asjad Iqbal (NBP) advanced with a 4-1 victory over Aftab Baig. Sohail Shahzad of Sindh also registered a 4-0 win, which included a high break of 132.

Punjab's Awaisullah Munir, the Asian 6-red title winner in 2024, progressed with a 4-1 victory, featuring breaks of 79, 51 and 77.

Further results saw Mudassar Yaqoob (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) defeat Mohammad Yousaf (Balochistan) 4-0 in a series of close frames. Mohammad Faizan (Punjab) survived a tough battle against Shah Khan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), eventually prevailing 4-3.

Zulfiqar A. Qadir (Sindh) also won a seven-frame encounter against Mohammad Shahbaz (Punjab) 4-3. Ali Hamza (Sindh) defeated Ghulam Abbas (Balochistan) 4-0.

In the all-Sindh encounter Ian Mark John beat Nadir Shah 4-1, finishing with a break of 52.

The round matches and last-24 knockout rounds are played as best-of-seven-frame contests. The pre-quarterfinals, quarter-finals and semi-finals will be best-of-nine while the final will be a best-of-11-frame match.

Kyrgios firm on skipping Australian Open singles

MELBOURNE: Nick Kyrgios was feted like a rockstar at an exhibition event in Melbourne on Tuesday, but remained adamant a decision not to play singles at the Australian Open was the right one.

The 2022 Wimbledon finalist last week ruled himself out of contention for a wildcard as he makes a comeback after an injury-ravaged three years.

The Australian showman will instead focus on doubles at the Grand Slam tournament which starts on Sunday.

Swiss three-time Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka and Australians Jordan Thompson and Chris O'Connell were awarded the last three wildcards.

"Someone like Stan, who's played three or four competitive matches in the United Cup, all at a super high level, there's absolutely no doubt in my mind that he deserves it," Kyrgios told broadcaster Channel Nine at the Kooyong Classic.

"And it just wouldn't be fair of me to have so many doubts physically to go out there and play some of the best players in the world in the best-of-five and not even be sure that I could back up one round."

Kyrgios was speaking after beating China's Zhang Zhizhen in a super tiebreak 6-3, 4-6, 11-9 watched by crowds of screaming fans.

"The atmosphere out here was nuts ... and if I didn't have this I don't know what else I'd do," he said. "I've got a lot of other things going on off the court but there's no feeling like this."—AFP